

Rahall Report: On Anniversary of Sago and Aracoma Mine Tragedies, Mine Safety Still at the Forefront

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This January, as we mark the one-year anniversaries of the tragedies at the Sago and Aracoma mines, we pay tribute to all of the brave coal miners who died in 2006 - one of the most deadly for coal miners in recent history - and to their families who fought for passage of a new law to repair a failing national mine safety system.

This past June, after many months of pressing for action, I joined my West Virginia colleagues in shepherding the MINER Act through Congress. The Miner Act includes requirements for more oxygen to be made available to trapped and escaping miners for a "sustained period of time." It calls immediately for redundant communications devices to link miners underground with rescuers on the surface, and it requires two-way telecommunications and tracking devices to be in the mines by mid-2009. It calls for fines to be levied on mines that fail to timely report accidents, a provision that has already been put to use by Mine Safety and Health Administration.

The MINER Act is milestone legislation, but it is just one marker on the long route toward ensuring the health and safety of our miners.

The entire West Virginia delegation united behind that bill and the mission to return MSHA to the business of protecting our miners. That effort continues.

In September, I worked to bring together a \$4 million statewide mine safety and technology consortium, to be housed at WVU Technical and Community College. The Mine Safety Technology Consortium will be a catalyst to transforming West Virginia coal mining, know-how, skills and capabilities to produce superior coal mine safety and health technology, products and services, including training technologies.

The Consortium is one component of a \$4 million-dollar project, which is the result of my deep concern for mine worker safety and vision for the future. The project is being funded by a \$2 million EDA grant I helped secure, \$1 million in state funding and another \$1 million in private funds, including \$100,000 from Arch Coal and \$200,000 from State Electric.

Project collaborators include the WVU Institute of Technology-Community and Technical College; Marshall University Center for Environmental, Geotechnical & Applied Sciences (CEGAS); Wheeling Jesuit University-National Technology Transfer Center (NTTC); West Virginia High Technology Consortium (WVHTC); Robert C. Byrd Institute for Advanced Flexible Manufacturing (RCBI); and the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA).

We have seen many mine safety improvements in the past several months. Seals have been strengthened; new guidelines have been issued for air packs; new inspectors are being recruited and trained. MSHA has been taking a

good, hard look at refuges, too, and given the success of such refuges in other nations, this is long overdue. But even with these advancements, more work needs to be done.

In keeping with the requirements of MINER, mine operators have submitted more than 600 emergency response plans to MSHA for approval. So far, only a handful have been fully approved as the agency works to address the question of how mines will comply with MINER's mandate that oxygen be available to trapped miners for "a sustained period of time." Many in Congress argued that defining the period could impede technological advances and may result in limiting the level of air supplies rather than spurring research and development that could save more lives. Pushing the technological envelope to strive for the longest possible supplies of breathable air for trapped miners is a necessity and one that MSHA must pursue.

While the State of West Virginia has completed two studies on the Sago disaster, as well as two on the Aracoma mine fire, the Federal Mine Safety and Health Administration has said that it expects to complete its official reports on Sago and Aracoma within the next three months. Any lessons that can be learned from these reports should be turned into action to save more lives.

In January, one year ago, television viewers around the globe were riveted to heart-wrenching images emanating from our West Virginia mining communities. They pulled for us, and prayed with us - and in the words of Mother Jones, the plight of miners "permeated the hearts of men all over the world." Those West Virginia tragedies sparked a reenergized fight to improve the lot of miners.

My deep appreciation goes to those Sago and Aracoma families who lost so much and gave so greatly. We owe profound gratitude to those families who selflessly fought to ensure that others would not suffer as they have. The renewed emphasis on mine safety that has emerged over the past year is directly attributable to their fierce conviction that some good would come of their heartbreak. What resulted from their grief is a legacy worthy of their loved ones - a renewed national commitment to the health safety of all coal miners.

U.S. Rep. Nick Rahall (D-WV) represents West Virginia's 3rd District